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ABSTRACT

A master's level program was developed by the University of South Dakota to train teachers to serve children with disabilities within the general school environment. Twenty-six leaders in special education and regular education, all practicing teachers, were selected to participate in the project and to serve as a core group in the statewide transition to a collaborative/consultative model of service delivery for children with severe disabilities. Coursework was delivered over a 3-year period with the third year focusing on an internship experience. Program delivery included on-campus classes during summer sessions, off-campus classes at three sites, one telecourse, and use of the new South Dakota Rural Development Telecommunications Network at eight sites. Following their coursework, students completed a self-evaluation of 15 competencies identified as preparing teachers to work with disabled children and to use collaboration skills to facilitate inclusion of disabled students into the regular environment. An exit interview provided a culminating reflective activity for the internship and covered knowledge of special education and interventions; collaboration/consultation skills; the impact of the practicum on regular education; awareness of complexity of the team approach; evidence of professionalism in organizing and planning activities for students, parents, teachers, and paraprofessionals; and evidence of leadership and teamwork capabilities and communication skills. Exit interviews incorporated a presentation by the student, a formal question and answer session, a closed session for evaluators to discuss their observations, followed by an open feedback session with the student. Includes lists of required competencies and internship requirements. (LP)

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AN EXIT INTERVIEW: THE CULIMINATING REFLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Introduction

The rural nature of South Dakota and the fact that the state is noncategorical require special educators to be "experts" not only in characteristics of many areas of disabilities, but also in teaching methodologies. "Training Teachers for All Children in South Dakota" was a federal grant awarded from the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The project was designed as a master's level training program which would train teachers to serve children with disabilities within the general school environment. Twenty six leaders in special education and regular education were identified from across the very rural state of South Dakota to be participants in this project. They were to serve as a core group to provide for the transition of special education service delivery to a collaborative/consultative teacher model for children with severe disabilities.

With the focus of this program being on a collaborative consultation model to facilitate inclusion in general education settings, it was imperative that grant participants display their ability to cooperatively problem-solve, design programs, and evaluate needs within their local districts. Ultimately, this had to be articulated and visible not only in assignments completed but also observed by others at the exit interview. The exit interview was required as a culminating reflective activity for the internship. This practice of assessment has shown great promise as amethod by which teacher educators can engage students, practicing professionals, administrators, parents, and others in building partnerships between schools, universities, and the community (C. Cloninger, personal communication, May 24, 1993). This exit interview has become a culminating reflective experience that has resulted in an excellent public relations tool to foster support for special education and community opportunities for individuals with disabilities in these rural communities.

Description of Training Project

A primary goal for the outreach masters degree program was the development of a trained group of educators to assume leadership roles with the objective of leading their communities and educational settings toward greater integrated opportunities for children with severe disabilities. Four major impact indicators were also identified by the grant. First, that the collaborative/consultive teacher model was affecting the methods

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and practices of rural school districts in the assessment of children and placement of children into integrated settings. Second, that professionals trained could easily articulate the concepts of least restrictive environment to fellow teachers, parents, and the community to encourage placement of children with severe disabilities including children with multi-sensory impairments within general education settings. Third, that there was evidence of teacher acceptance of placement of children with severe disabilities including those with multi-sensory impairments into general settings and within home districts. Finally, that training of administrators would be viewed as an ongoing process but that it would have an impact on children being more readily served within general education settings within home districts.

Coursework for the program reflected these goals and was delivered over a period of three years with the third year focusing on the internship experience. Because of the rural nature of our state, the location of the University and the fact that these students were all practicing teachers, creative delivery of the coursework was essential. The delivery of course work information included on-campus classes during a shortened summer session, outreach delivered coursework to three different sites, use of one telecourse, and the use of the new South Dakota Rural Development Telecommunications Network (RDTN) at some eight sites across the state.

This project has been based on a list of competencies designed to prepare teachers who are knowledgeable in working with children with severe disabilities but also knowledgeable in the collaboration skills necessary to facilitate inclusion into regular environments. Students completed a self-evaluation of their competencies in the following 15 areas along with designing personal improvement plans to be followed during the internship experience if needed.

Table 1
Project Competency Areas

Program Philosophy, History and Ethical Issues
Curriculum for Students with Severe Disabilities
Assessment of Students with Severe Disabilities
Development of Goals and Objectives in Various Domains
Classroom Scheduling
Interventions in Various Domains
Language Development
Physical Management
Behavior Management
Parent Involvement
Litigation and Legislation History
Professional Organization
Supervision of Paraprofessionals
Interdisciplinary Participation in IEP Development and Implementation
Professional Collaboration and Consultation

Internship Requirements

The notion of an exit interview reflected the requirements for the internship. The internship requirements were built upon the knowledge base gained through the masters level coursework. The focus of many of the assignments was on involving the school and community in accepting their roles in providing an inclusive environment for these children with disabilities. Table 2 presents a listing of the fourteen assignments that were to be completed during the internship experience:

Table 2
Internship Requirements

1. Preparation of two IEP's with a written discussion of the team's collaborative process involved in the IEP development
2. Participation in regular classroom instructional interventions
3. Design and implementation of individual instructional interventions for students with documentation of progress
4. Documentation and evaluation of a "Sharing Expertise" project
5. Development and implementation of a systems change project that reflected collaborative planning and long range benefits to the school and students
6. Preparation of an evaluation plan and report for a student
7. Observation of other classes where children with disabilities were being taught in inclusive settings.
8. Observation of two different programs for persons with severe disabilities
9. Documentation through use of videotape of their work with students in a variety of instructional domains
10. Participation in on-going professional activities
11. Some type of paraprofessional planning
12. Some type of transition Planning
13. Collaboration activities with teachers
14. Collaboration activities with parents

The Exit Interview Process

Evidence of expertise, leadership, and professional responsibility was exhibited in the organization and presentation of information at the exit interviews. Numerous examples of quality programming aimed at inclusion as well as collaborative efforts of the interns were cited by administrators, other school personnel, parents, community leaders, and university instructors who were present at these exit interviews.

The exit interview process was an extension of a collaborative/consultative team approach using a philosophy grounded in reflective teaching. Participants in the exit interview typically had been involved in activities where they work

cooperatively to achieve a common, agreed upon goal through the process of decision-making and problem-solving. These are among the critical skills, according to Villa and Thousand (1988), for successful inclusion and maintenance of students with severe disabilities in the regular classrooms. In evaluating the outcome of the exit interview, observers were asked to note both the intent and the effect of the various projects presented by the practicum student. Phillips and McCullough (1990) suggest that the collaborative consultation model can be evaluated in terms of administrative support, systematic program development, ownership with action, feasibility, and reduced resistance of staff based on practical and specific professional development activities.

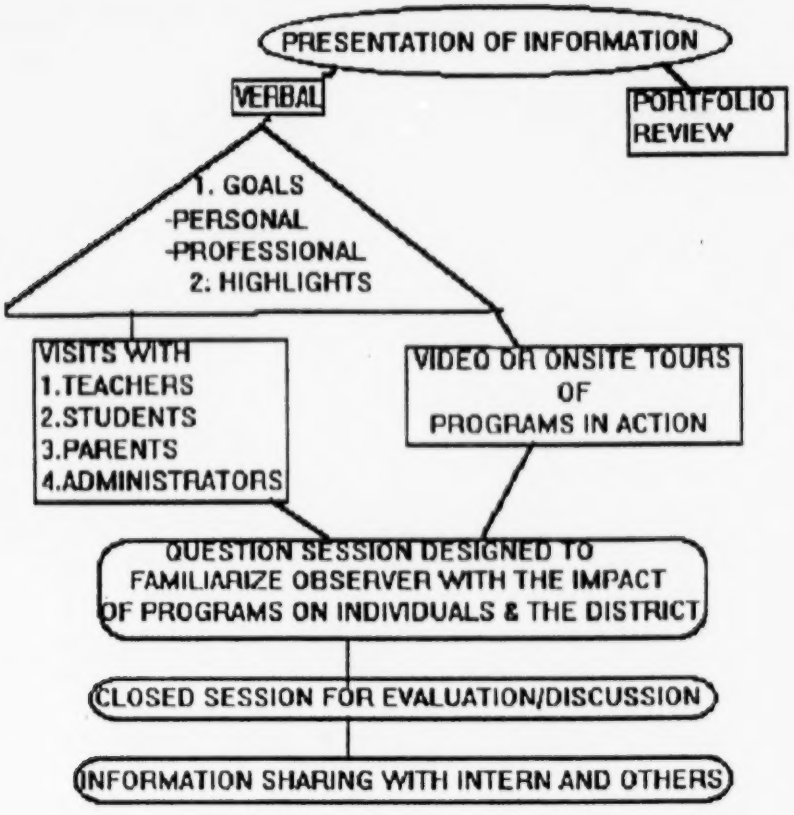
The specific evaluation criteria for the exit interview were:

1. Evidence of expertise with regard to knowledge of special education and interventions.
2. Evidence of collaboration/consultation skills.
3. Articulation of the impact of the practicum on regular education.
4. Demonstration of awareness as to the complexity of a team approach with regard to assessment, teaching, and planning a systems change.
5. Evidence of professionalism in organizing and planning activities for students, parents, teachers, and paraprofessionals.
6. Evidence of leadership and teamwork capabilities, skills in communication/listening, sharing knowledge, and understanding.

The model for each exit interview incorporated a presentation by the practicum student, a formal question and answer session, a closed session for evaluators to discuss their observations, followed by an open session with the student to give feedback. Students were required to organize the actual format and invite participants to serve as the team of observers. The exit interview team always included the university internship supervisor. Others who were interviewed by the team included the local administrator, principal, superintendent or director of special education. The interview team itself was varied in each school including such individuals as university teacher educators, Department of Education/Office of Special Education employees, local business and professional leaders, other teachers, school psychologists, social workers, school board members, or related service providers.

Figure 1 shows the overall structure of the exit interview.

Figure 1
The Exit Interview Procedure



An Exit Interview Case Study

The following is an illustration of an actual exit interview. This particular exit interview occurred in a very rural community in South Dakota. The student population of this elementary school included primarily native Americans. The special educator had been employed at this school about four years. Participants on the exit interview team included the teacher's internship supervisor from the university, a school board member from the district, and two regular education university professors.

In preparation for the interview, the special educator had completed a number of activities. She had sought parental permission and actually videotaped the children with disabilities in the inclusive settings. She had also videotaped parents of these children describing how their education had changed and how their children's interactions with other children had changed. Others included in the video were regular education teachers, peers who served as peer buddies to the students with disabilities, and integrated classrooms in action. This had been edited in a professional manner to facilitate expertise sharing beyond this

school district. The intern had also prepared interview questions to ask the various persons who would be interviewed.

During the actual exit interview, the outside exit interview team observed in three classrooms where inclusion of children with disabilities was occurring. In addition, the team interviewed students who acted as peer buddies, a parent of a child with a disability, regular education personnel who worked as co-teachers, the principal, and the other special education teacher and paraprofessional who worked with the intern. The breadth of impact of this intern's training on the school was evident in all of these interviews. Clearly, there had been a true team process that had made the changes in this school for these children with disabilities.

In a school that is in a "remote" as well as "rural" part of South Dakota, little or no opportunity usually exits to actually share these excellent teaching experiences. The exit interview process educated and expanded the knowledge base of local individuals (the school board member) as well as people who are training our future regular educators (university professors). It provided everyone on the team a new way of looking at the potential of individuals with disabilities and examining where we might go in education.

Conclusion

In all cases, positive interdependence (Thousand, Fox, Reid, Godek, & Williams, 1986) was exhibited as an outcome of the exit interview and this provided a reflective framework to support future collaborative teaming. The teachers and schools were given their due recognition for the collaboration they had exhibited in creatively modifying the learning opportunities for persons with disabilities in their home schools. Problem-solving and goal-setting was often one of the practical results of the exit interview. In part, this was due to the sharing of experience in a non-threatening environment, communicating and valuing practical knowledge, articulating what was known about the uniqueness of a setting, demystifying professional roles, and building collegiality. These have been identified as components of reflective teaching (Gore, 1987). These factors of reflective teaching were also present as goals of the individuals involved in the collaborative/consultative internship. The exit interview process has proven to be a positive means to build on the many facets of both collaborative and reflective experiences.

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